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GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

1832-1902

JOHN MURRAY & COMPANY

Harvard Divinity School



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*Handwritten text, possibly a signature or name, in cursive script.*











**GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS**

**An Address**

BY

**JOHN WHITE CHADWICK**



NEW YORK  
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

1893





**Harvard Divinity School**



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From H. B. James







Union into which Washington had integrated thirteen rebellious and discordant states, and who eradicated the poisonous growth which Washington had tolerated with a fearful heart. But, if only Abraham Lincoln stands with Washington as a public benefactor in the highest rank, there are many who are worthy to be named with these because of their commanding virtues and their splendid service to our country and mankind; and among these, if there are some of more exalted genius than George William Curtis, and more conspicuous and imposing fame, there is not one who served his country with a more perfect loyalty, or who made himself more widely honored and more deeply loved.

He was born in Providence, Rhode Island, February 24th, 1824; but, as we gather here to-night, the nearness of



his birthday is much less suggestive than this 22d of February, which is the first anniversary of his last great public utterance. Then he spoke of Lowell, and as we saw the speaker, so graceful, so benignant, and listened to his large discourse, so simple and sincere in its appreciation of his noble friend, set to that

“music like mild lutes  
Or silver-coated flutes,”

which was the beautiful habit of his public and his private speech, yet noted that, however he might rise at times to the occasion of his theme, he had not that physical strength which in old days throbbed in his eager heart, we wondered whether we were enjoying for the last time that sound and vision of delight, but little thought that he would go from us so soon. The months that have elapsed since his departure



have abounded in such eulogy as never in our history until now has echoed and re-echoed the high praise of one who held no political office, and on whom none save the briefest and most inconspicuous had ever been bestowed. The reason for this wide and lofty tribute is not far to seek. It has been inspired by gratitude to one who with his superb orations stirred in men's hearts a wonderful delight and admiration; whose Easy Chair had been domesticated in many thousand fire-side nooks, and had made him who sat in it a friend in every one; whose public service was remembered by all those whose memories went back to those great days upon the edge of battle, when the lines were being sharply drawn, and all those who were associated with him in the more valuable service of his later life. Last, but not



least, he endeared himself immeasurably to those who knew him best, among whom were many of that guild which has the public eye and ear continually beneath its magic spell. And it may be that with these inspirations there has mingled something of noble shame and vain regret, impelling those who sometimes did the living man injustice in their thought and speech to come and fling "some mountain harebell hung with tears" upon his grave.

Curtis's stock and parentage decreed that he should be well born and happily endowed, and the great personal traditions of his town and state augmented his inheritance to a degree that made him rich indeed. His father was a man of fine integrity, who, for all the warmth of his affections, held his children to a strict account both for their morals and their manners.





Though engaged in business, he was a lover of good books and profoundly interested in political affairs. The boy was early motherless—too early for the mother's memory to be a benediction on his life. Her father, James Burrill, Jr., a man remarkable for the dignity of his character and the eloquence of his speech, was a Senator of the United States from Rhode Island, who opposed in 1820 that Missouri Compromise which was then a concession to slavery, and afterwards a barrier across its fateful way. When that barrier was removed in 1854, young Curtis was the Prince Rupert of the cavaliers who flung themselves upon the vanguard of the proslavery advance; and it is permitted us to wonder whether it was the inheritance from his noble ancestor which gave his youthful blood that moral flow. It might have come



another way — from Dr. Samuel Hopkins's antislavery spirit, one of the traditions of Rhode Island of which he loved to speak, and which quickened Channing's conscience to the wickedness of human slavery. It might have come from Channing himself, his great spiritual leader, and did come from him in good measure, from whatever source beside. In the fine old Unitarian church in Providence they show the pew in which Curtis sat, a lovely, fair-haired boy, and even then he had an ear that vibrated in unison with all beautiful and stirring speech. Very dear to him were the streets of Providence, and through them he wandered to the wharves, where not long before West India rum and slaves were landed as equally the rightful property of Christian gentlemen, and, laying his hand upon some great ship's

blistering side, took in the genial heat and put himself in mystical communication with all tropic seas and shores, and contracting a rare scent of Eastern gums and spices, to say nothing of West India sugar and molasses, went home to the domestic inquisition in good odor with himself and all the world. Later he came to love the city best because Roger Williams founded it and gave to him a phrase to conjure with — “soul liberty,” the best name he knew for the best thing under the heaven’s cope. His early home was in the shadow of Brown University, of which he had many pleasant memories despite the awfulness of Dr. Wayland’s thunderous brows upon commencement days, and with which, through his brother Burrill’s course of study there, he had the liveliest sympathy, dreaming a dream of going there



himself some day. But this was not to be ; changes in the father's business which brought him to New York prevented it and led to happier things. George Eliot sang that

“ Were another childhood world her share,  
She would be born a little sister there ” ;

and that Curtis would have been born a little brother we have every reason to believe, so loyal was his affection to his older brother and so gladly did he follow where that brother led. Two years in a New York business house did not enamour him of a business life ; but if they only furnished him with the original of Titbottom, the old book-keeper of “ Prue and I,” and with Mr. Bourne, the poor rich man in that book of dreams, they could not have been better spent. Then the big brother, on whom the Transcendentalists had cast

their spell, beckoned him to Brook Farm, and he made haste to leave his invoices and sales and join himself to those who hoped they had discovered there the Earthly Paradise.

No social experiment in America has attracted so much attention in proportion to the numbers it engaged and the period of its duration as Brook Farm. A pair of Hawthorne's lovers once proposed a private meeting, and, coming to the trysting-place, found a picnic in possession of the field. Emerson says that Brook Farm was "a perpetual picnic, a French revolution in small, an Age of Reason in a patty-pan." But even a picnic asks for a seclusion of its own, and to Brook Farm there came four thousand curious visitors in a single year. Its history continues to attract the curious, and its historians have sometimes touched it with unerring



grace and charm : Curtis from time to time, Emerson in his delightful "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," Frothingham in his "Life of George Ripley," who inspired the enterprise and brought to it a hope and courage that could not easily be disappointed or dismayed. Better than these, he brought a wife of such intellectual and spiritual attainments that, in knowing her, young Curtis got the liberal education which he had seemed to miss. He came for study, a boarder, not a worker, save as his helpful and chivalric disposition prompted him to take a fork in the hay-field or to assist the young women in their heavier tasks. It was rare instruction that he got from such teachers as Mr. and Mrs. Ripley, George P. Bradford in belle-lettres, Charles A. Dana in German, John S. Dwight in music. Then, too,

there were distinguished visitors—Emerson ; Alcott ; Theodore Parker, coming across the fields from his West Roxbury parsonage ; William Henry Channing, full of a fine enthusiasm and a moving eloquence ; and Margaret Fuller, brilliant, entertaining, fascinating in her wise and beautiful discourse. These threw of what they had into the treasury of the common good. The community was at first idyllic in its spontaneous simplicity, and afterwards mechanical under the Fourier dispensation, which our young student did not like nor long endure. With a profoundly serious aspiration at its heart, there were some follies and vagaries, and of humorous circumstance there was no lack. Shunning “the squalid contentment of society,” it looked sometimes as if this had been exchanged for the “brassy and lacquered life” of the

hotel. Hawthorne—who came to court the muses, and had none of Ripley's meditative satisfaction in milking a dissentient cow—afterwards made the Farm the subject, after a fashion, of his "Blithedale Romance," describing perfectly the externals of the scene, but leaving out the spiritual contents. He protested that he did not intend his novel for a portrait; but Curtis, writing that, nevertheless, it represented what Brook Farm was to Hawthorne, resented the picture as no less false to the enterprise in general than to Margaret Fuller in particular. "No friend," said Emerson, "who knew Margaret Fuller could recognize her rich and brilliant genius under the dismal mask which the public fancied was meant for her in that disagreeable story." One thing could hardly be more different from another than was Mr. Curtis's hap-





py and grateful recollection of his two years at Brook Farm from Hawthorne's lugubrious romance. He never forgot the debt he owed to it, and to his brother for directing thitherward his steps. The flowers and fruits he gathered there furnished the seeds of many a future good. Very pleasant are the recollections of his happy youth, as he enjoyed it there, which have been cherished by his friends. In those recollections he passes and repasses, graceful as a fawn, his face as gravely beautiful as in his maturer years, impersonating Hamlet in the masquerade or singing the whole evening long to the Arcadian band; his best distinction being that he was the little children's friend, blessing them where others cursed, and always ready to help them in a tangled lesson or lead them in a merry game.

The highest influence which touched



him at Brook Farm was that of Emerson. The same influence was continued at Concord for two years, and deepened by a closer contact and more frequent intercourse with the gentle seer. It was an influence more practical than speculative. The doctrine of the Over-soul might be so high that he could not attain to it; but the summons to simplicity, to sincerity, to independence, to a preference for the light within his own clear breast to any other, however vaunted as from heaven, was perfectly comprehensible—easily understood, if not as easily obeyed. At Concord the brothers were hired laborers with one farmer and another; but shortening the working hours, except in hay-time, that they might explore “the unknown river” or the country roads or give themselves to serious studies. The Concord residence also brought our hero



into personal relations with Hawthorne, Thoreau, Alcott, and Ellery Channing, but with imperfect sympathy, not even Emerson's good opinion of Alcott's wisdom being able to prevent Curtis's listening to it with an incredulous smile and speaking of it with an irreverent laugh. Already the extremely practical, unspeculative quality of his mind was making itself evident. The profound originality of Emerson never lost its hold upon his mind, but for what was merely peculiar and eccentric in the Transcendental Movement he soon acquired a frank distaste. Possibly he had heard from Emerson the wise saying of Goethe, "A talent is perfected in solitude; a character, in the stream of the world." It was on the formation of a character that at this time he was bent, and for this the isolation of a peculiar people seemed



hardly more favorable than solitude. And so again he followed the big brother's lead—this time to Europe for four years of residence, mixing with huge enjoyment of the spectacle a good deal of studious work, adding one European language to another, and attending lectures in the German universities. But all Europe was, in fact, his university, with a post-graduate course in Egypt and the Holy Land.

He went abroad in 1846, when he was twenty-two years old, and returned in 1850. Doubtless in some respects a more definite curriculum would have furnished him with a better education. But it was not as if he had put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes. His whole course of travel was unhurried, and in Venice and Berlin he lingered a whole season through. With Cranch and Hicks and Kensett he revelled in



the wonders of Italian art and in the skies that overhung so smilingly the sad and strange memorials of a greatness that had passed away. That his stay in Europe coincided with the revolution of 1848 was a circumstance of immense significance, giving a sharper spice of personal danger to journeys which at the best were none too safe; the fierce outbreaks in every city furnishing moments of exuberant hope and tragedies of inevitable defeat. Here was a world so much larger than any that our saunterer had known before, that it could not but expand his sympathies and give his thoughts a wider and a deeper flow. At the same time it stored his mind with an incalculable wealth and splendor of historical associations and with memories of delightful scenes and happy-hearted friends, which later were to him an in-



exhaustible resource when he would give his public utterance some rarer charm or clothe it with some ampler grace.

It must not be imagined that up to this time Curtis had been merely a passive bucket, coolly accepting everything that was pumped into him and rendering nothing back. To be a man of letters was his dream before he left Brook Farm. There and at Concord he wrote many things, but, with an exigent ideal they did not satisfy, he kept them to himself or only read them privately. To read them now would do much, no doubt, to dispel the sweet illusion that his style was heaven-born, needing no patient travail of his mind to bring it forth. They would reveal "the steps of beauty" by which he climbed from his first crudities and imperfections to so much of ease and grace as marked

his early publications; also the primordial germs of some of the most lovely fancies of his later years. Certain letters to the *Harbinger* in 1845 were his first venture of a public character, and the publicity was not gross, but narrow and select, seeing that the *Harbinger* was the organ of the Brook-Farmers in their Fourierite decadence. The letters were written from New York in the interim between his leaving Concord and his going abroad. They were musical and dramatic criticisms. From Europe he sent occasional letters to the New York *Times* and *Tribune*, and on his return he immediately engaged in musical and dramatic criticism for Mr. Greeley, who by this time had made Ripley of Brook Farm the literary editor, and Charles A. Dana, Curtis's best friend in the same Arcadia, the managing editor of his paper. Shortly his tal-

ent took a wider sweep, and the readers of the *Tribune*, in 1851, found Mr. Greeley's heartless recommendations of the recent compromise measures as the best we could expect agreeably diversified with those studies of Newport and Nahant and Saratoga and the other watering-places of that time which make up the book called "Lotus-Eating." It is a charming book; so charming that to stay at home and read it would perhaps give more pleasure than those famous places now afford. Doctor Channing thought it not presumptuous to hope that something corresponding to our earthly joys of air and light would be permitted us in another life, and in this particular Curtis must have sympathized with him. He had the art of husbanding these joys and of so making his words express them that those days of long ago still shed their beauty





on our hearts. In these studies there was a good deal of comparative scenery, the writer was so drenched in mists of Alpine heights and falling waters, and in the associations of an older civilization. The "emotion recollected in tranquillity" was often keener than any which the immediate object could excite. But more important than the description of each lovely scene was the eye for social manners and the stroke that gave their hollowness and insincerity, their meanness and vulgarity, a shameful perpetuity upon the vivid page.

Almost simultaneously with "Lotus-Eating" appeared the "Nile Notes of a Howadji," and soon after "The Howadji in Syria." Whereupon the young author woke up one fine morning to find himself famous and dubbed "The Howadji" by his friends, from whom

the sobriquet was caught up by the general public and did much to invest him with a mysterious charm, as vague and penetrating as some perfume of the Eastern world. In point of art these books were an advance upon the "Lotus-Eating," but morally they marked a previous stage. They were no stern reflections on the soft, languorous mood the Orient had woven round and round him with its subtle spells. They were the reproduction of that mood, floated off from the pages of his journal, where it lay as warm as Eastern draperies and as bright as Khadra's smile. As for this real or imaginary Khadra with whom the Howadji instituted a flirtation in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, this episode was doubtless one of several which shocked the Puritan temper of the time. In truth it marked the exquisite satirical recoil from the



pretence of holiness in things and places that could claim no genuine associations with the Christian origins. The one engrossing memory of Palestine sternly required reality of every circumstance and emotion. But while the "Nile Notes" and "The Howadji in Syria" were not immoral in a single phrase or implication—and Curtis very properly and indignantly resented any suggestion to the contrary—he had no regrets or apologies to offer for his complete abandonment of himself to the peculiar witchery of the East, and to Egypt's fascination as of Cleopatra's smile. "Delight and satisfaction which are not sensual but sensuous," he wrote, "become the law of your being; conscience, lulled all the way from Sicily in the soft rocking lap of the Mediterranean, falls quite asleep at Cairo, and you take your chance with the other

flowers." What prophetess that had presumed to prophesy that the author of a brace of books written in this temper would yet be found among the organizers of public justice and the leaders of political reform, would not have met Cassandra's fate?—the most absolute incredulity on the part of every one who heard her prophecy. Nothing seemed more unlikely in 1852 than that in 1856 Curtis would be stirring up the young men of America to noble rage against a giant wrong. Do men gather wheat and corn of violets and roses? Nevertheless, reading the "Nile Notes" and "The Howadji in Syria" in the light of Curtis's subsequent career, we find among the roses and the violets, among the sleepy lotuses and the smiling houris, a few happy signs that he had not wholly lost the secret of his earlier inspirations; that the fire he

had kindled at Brook Farm and Concord had not gone out upon the altar of his mind, and might yet touch his lips with living flame.

The time was one of moral relaxation. Horace Greeley and William Cullen Bryant had accepted as a finality the Compromise Measures which had brought Whittier's "Ichabod" upon Webster's head: if such, how many more! The antislavery vote fell off nearly one half from 1848 to 1852. But we need not look so far away for influences inimical to Curtis's discovery of his better self. His manly beauty and his social graces opened for him all doors. He adopted De Quincey's rapturous praise of dancing as his own, and never at any time was he disloyal to this early love. Until the last he would sooner have spoken disrespectfully of our old friend the

equator than of Terpsichore—"Muse of the many twinkling feet." Cultivated, brilliant, witty, wearing with easy grace the laurels of his first success, he found himself the cynosure of women's lovely eyes, the object of a thousand flatteries, with much honest admiration. Then the reaction came. There are fore-gleams of it in "Lotus-Eating," and in "The Potiphar Papers" it blazes from the hot, indignant page. "It is called a satire, but after much diligent reading we cannot discover the satire." These words are Curtis's, and he is speaking of Thackeray's "Vanity Fair." They are equally applicable to "The Potiphar Papers," especially to the opening chapter, which is perfectly direct and simple, without a syllable of paltering in a double sense. It was the condemnation of a society which was "the very apotheosis of gilt ginger-

bread." Had Curtis seen the horrid spectacle that he described? Yes; but with Titmarsh's, not with Titbottom's, spectacles. It is not strange that Curtis didn't love the book in after-years. He knew that it was after Thackeray, and, like the artist's "Bull after Paul Potter," a long way after. He had struck with the butt of his musket and the back of his sword, not with the bayonet and the edge. Thackeray's rapier had turned into a bludgeon in his unpractised hand. He did better the next time, in "Prue and I," a fantasy that was all his own, full of the sweetness and the kindness of his own gentle heart. It is just as good to-day as when it first appeared. It will be just as good fifty years hence as it is now, for if by that time the world is done with vulgar ostentation, done with the pride of wealth, done

with the measuring of all things by a gold standard, it will not be done with simplicity and sincerity, with beauty, tenderness, and grace, with sentiment as pure as morning's dew; and "Prue and I" is a book so full of these things that until the world is done with them forever it should have a place for it

"Full of sweet dreams and health and quiet breathing."

"The Potiphar Papers" and "Prue and I" were written for *Putnam's New Monthly Magazine*, of which Curtis was for several years an editor, with Charles F. Briggs of our own city—better known as "Harry Franco"—and Parke Godwin as his colaborers. Curtis's letters to Briggs from all parts of the country are full of gayety. He addresses him by all the famous names of history, and signs himself with others



equally various and absurd. Was he still able to maintain this cheerful tone when in 1857 the publication-house in which he had put all his patrimony, and much more, went down a hopeless wreck, and left him with a debt upon his shoulders so ponderous that not till 1873 was it paid to the last cent and his freedom joyfully regained? Less conscientious, he might have availed himself of a purely technical construction to evade the monstrous claim with which he had been saddled by a dishonest partner. But to any friend suggesting to him such a course the answer would have been, "Get thee behind me, Satan"; if not the words, "a fury in the words" connoting that. Considering himself morally bound, he manfully assumed the debt, and, working like a slave with tongue and pen, and living with severe economy, he

devoted all his savings from his thirty-fourth until his fiftieth year—the period of his perfect prime—to the payment of a penalty too hastily and foolishly incurred. Here was an experience to toughen the moral fibre of the man, if there was any need of further toughening after the initial step. The event proved that there was need of this; that the stuff which served him well enough in the antislavery struggle would have been broken like a reed under the stress of such political weather as he encountered further on. It may seem that, in accepting for himself this steep ascent, he had proved himself to be possessed already of the most stubborn and unconquerable will. But he that putteth on the harness may not boast himself as he that taketh it off. Many hard things have been resolved upon by men of a romantic

temper in the self-consciousness of some dramatic situation, where few have been carried out to an appropriate end. It is the end that crowns the work. There came a time when those who did not know the man, persons of credulous disposition or inventive mind, were ready to impute to him some mercenary or prudential motive for his political action. Then those who knew him best, remembering the patient service of those hard interminable years, smiled sadly to themselves to think that one who seemed to be so widely known should be so little understood.

The public was still calling Curtis the Howadji when he began to call himself the Easy Chair, having succeeded to that comfortable-sounding place in *Harper's Magazine*, which for two years before his own incumbency

had been filled by Donald G. Mitchell, whose "Dream Life" and "Reveries of a Bachelor" are to-day as much as ever necessary to every youth and maid for whom no sentiment can be too pure and sweet. Considering the various work and worry, corresponding with the five and thirty years of his incumbency, which Curtis had to do and bear, his new sobriquet had a tinge of irony. The long course of little essays which as the Easy Chair he wrote for our instruction, warning, and delight is a sufficient answer to the vain regret that he should have abandoned the primrose path of literature for the shards and thorns of the political highways and byways. It is not the only answer, for he was an editor and an orator as well as an essayist for thirty years, and both as orator and editor he was as much the

man of letters as in the more unbent and playful manifestation of his talents in the Easy Chair. Those who, forgetting this, imagine that Curtis ceased from being literary when he became political have only to compare his editorials in *Harper's Weekly* with so much of the editorial writing of his contemporaries as makes up its general bulk, or the text of his various addresses and orations with the chaotic formlessness or the swelling bombast of the contemporary clergyman or politician. But the Easy Chair alone is a sufficient answer to the regrets of those who, doubtless, would have been much happier if Curtis had confined himself to that and let their politics alone. The various lines that marked his earlier work are all continued here: the musical and dramatic criticism of the *Tribune* reporter; the social satire of

the "Potiphar Papers," but with a more genial touch; the reveries of "Prue and I"; while the same travels that had furnished the materials for the "Nile Notes" and "The Howadji in Syria" lent their rich lights and tender gleams to many a happy reminiscence of the unreturning days. But the essays of the Easy Chair ranged through a wider field than the first literary ventures. Sometimes, as in "Honestus at the Caucus," they trenched upon the subjects habitually treated on the political platform and in the editorial chair, but in a manner of their own. Often, when some large-natured, earnest, useful man or woman passed within the veil, we were invited to reflect upon their virtues, and to take to heart the lessons of their beautiful and noble lives. The good books as well as the good people received their

careful and discriminating meed of praise.

“He spoke, and words more soft than rain  
Brought the age of gold again”:

the oratory of Everett and Phillips; the readings of Charles Dickens; the lectures of Thackeray and his personal traits, the dinners that he gave, the songs he sung; the playing of Thalberg and Gottschalk; the acting of Rachel; the singing of many a delightful voice, but of Jenny Lind's above them all, blessed forever; for when at Castle Garden, on the eve of her departure from America, she sang her farewell song, she held in her hand a bouquet of white rosebuds and deep carnations; and the young man, who five years before had travelled from Dresden to Berlin expressly to hear her sing, alone in that great audience knew

who had sent those flowers. Here alone was pledge of a perpetual homage, had not the divine simplicity of her art demanded it. Many were the good causes, weak, struggling, baffled, well-nigh crushed to earth, that looked to the Easy Chair for some encouragement, and did not look in vain! Meantime the style, the form, the manner of the thing, which in the earlier ventures had not always been simple and restrained, had found out the more excellent way and kept it with an even step. Emerson's conviction of the power of under-statement had been taken well to heart. With less of ornament, there was more of the essential beauty which could dispense with it and shine henceforth with a more pleasing light. Seeing that from first to last there were some fifteen hundred of these little essays, the marvellous thing is that, with so





many variations of the central theme, there was so much variety. And what *was* the central theme? It was a plea for good society; for the best society; which is not a matter of wealth, nor of some nobody's descent from somebody who was somebody or had something in some former generation; but a matter of intelligence and simplicity and kindness, freedom from vulgar show, the love of things that make for honor, purity, and nobility in the most ordinary lives. Here was a mirror held up to our social nature in America, where, if many thousands did not see themselves with shame, if not with loathing, they must have shut their eyes. Here, too, was that plea for the most American as the most self-respecting, the most honest, the most excellent, which was the burden equally of many an after-dinner speech and many a lecture

and address. One thing has not yet been determined by any critic of the Easy Chair — whether we should be more grateful to it for its exposure of our social shams and insincerities and its appeal to the better instincts of our social natures, or for its contribution to the beauty and the pleasantness of human life, the need of these things also being very great.

But Curtis is much less the writer than the speaker in the fond memory of his countrymen who had personal knowledge of his lectures and orations and in the imagination of less fortunate people. The lyceum forty years ago offered a splendid opportunity to the men who could speak as well as write, and it was seized upon by a great company of powerful, brilliant men, with some of an inferior degree. Curtis stepped in at once among the giants of

those days on his return from his long stay in foreign lands, and it was not long before his place among them was clearly defined and perfectly assured. It was not as the most massive or the most vehement or incisive or profound or humorous and impassioned. These designations belonged to Parker, Chapin, Phillips, Emerson, and Beecher. Curtis was the most pleasing, the most gracious, the most serene and musical of the goodly fellowship. As time went on he became one of the most serious and impressive. Nature had gifted him with a voice of rare and penetrating sweetness, which, somehow, he had learned or caught the art of using as an instrument obedient to every touch of his emotion and to every variation of his intellectual mood. From his first topic, "Contemporary Art in Europe," he soon passed to



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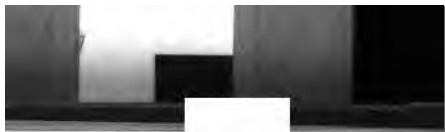
“Gold and Gilt in America,” evidently the doctrine of “The Potiphar Papers” driven home by word of mouth. It was not long before the “Sir Philip Sidney” lecture led the way in a long file of splendid characterizations of gentle and heroic men, deserving well the strain of lofty praise. Sumner, Phillips, Irving, Bryant, Lowell—these and their “star-bright companions” have a sure hold on the immortal years in their own words and works; but they will have a larger place in many a private heart because of Curtis’s sincere, though fervid, tributes to their various worth. Besides, how many great occasions did he set each in its round of golden circumstance, and find in each some noble shame and happy inspiration for the immediate time! He never forfeited the lofty privilege of public speech by using it merely to flatter

men, or make them laugh or cry, when he could turn it to some good account for truth and righteousness. The city banquet or the country festival that would have him for its ornament must have him on these terms or not at all. On the lyceum platform he spoke from his own personal conviction straight to the consciences of his fellow-men. As one turns over now the faded manuscripts, he may well wonder whether the forty-two lyceum associations to which he gave a lecture on "Modern Infidelity" in 1859 got what they bargained for. It could not have been of this lecture that a lady said to him, meaning to be very complimentary, "Oh, Mr. Curtis, how flowery that was!" For this one was just plain preaching, without one purple patch; driving home with various argument and illustration the protestant princi-

ple of the right of private judgment and the sacredness of individual opinion—in defiance, if need be, of all tradition and authority and public opinion whatsoever. No, he had not forgotten the lessons Emerson had taught him in the days ere yet “the superb and irresistible dandyism that we all know so well in the days of golden youth” had threatened for a time to take him in its snare.

But it was not the lecture upon “Modern Infidelity,” nor that upon “Fair Play for Women,” that made Curtis’s name in 1859 a name to be spoken against and one to stir up in the City of Brotherly Love a fierce and cruel mob, swearing he should not deliver his lecture, that they would hang him if he tried to do it, and to that end providing a stout rope. That was the finest compliment that Curtis





ever received, and it was well deserved, for the subject of his lecture was "The Present Aspect of the Slavery Question," and the date was December 15th, thirteen days after the hanging of John Brown. The proslavery spirit raged as fiercely in New York and Philadelphia as in Charleston or Savannah, and the fear and terror were as great of John Brown's marching soul. Mr. Curtis had lectures in his portfolio that would not have jarred upon the sensibilities of a proslavery audience. That upon "Contemporary Art in Europe" would have been perfectly acceptable. But Dr. Furness, with whom Mr. Curtis was staying in Philadelphia—the mildest-mannered man that ever faced a mob—was of the opinion that the lecture on "The Present Aspect of the Slavery Question" must be given, and Mr. Curtis was not in the least in-

clined to hold it back. And it *was* given ; the lecturer going to the hall aware of six revolvers in the pockets of his personal friends. It was given while six hundred policemen held the mob at bay, though unable to prevent its shattering the windows and injuring the audience with bricks and stones. It was a very calm and rational consideration of the only question which just then was worth considering. Evidently the Howadji's conscience, which had gone to sleep at Cairo, was now wide awake.

But its awakening had been late and slow. Five years younger than Lowell, Curtis was ten years behind him in the arousal of his antislavery spirit. Apparently there was something in the soil of Brook Farm that did not make good antislavery root and stalk. Lowell's "Present Crisis " he had regarded

not, nor the "Biglow Papers," nor Whittier's imprecatory psalms, nor Sumner's fruitless summons to Webster: "Assume, sir, these unperformed duties." In the "Potiphar Papers" there is one sentence, one only, that is prophetic of the coming man. The sending back of Thomas Sims or Anthony Burns to slavery excites him to another, written from Longfellow's house in Cambridge to a friend. Less was impossible for one who had counted Channing and Parker among the teachers of his youth. But in 1856 he also was among the prophets. Whence his awakening? In part, no doubt, from the same shock which had awakened Abraham Lincoln to a new manhood, and the conviction that a house divided against itself could not stand—the repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854. In part, something quite different and much more

personal. The girl who drew him to herself from all the multitude with whom he had danced so dreamily was a daughter of Francis George and Sarah B. Shaw, and these were antislavery people through and through. They had received the gospel from Theodore Parker when they were his West Roxbury parishioners, and from Lydia Maria Child, a teacher of the teachers in this holy war. No more than Garrison could they say, "This one thing I do"; but every true reform, as such, attracted them. Their influence upon Curtis must have been very great, so perfectly did they command his admiration and inspire his reverence and love. But, whatever influences worked the change, it was unmistakable, and it was potent for incalculable good. Something romantic in the character of Frémont may have made it easier for Cur-

tis to espouse his cause. But once espoused, it lifted him at once into the height of the great argument which was then going on. At Middletown, Connecticut, he addressed the students of the Wesleyan University on "The Duty of the American Scholar to Politics and the Times." He said: "I would gladly speak to you of the charms of pure scholarship; of the dignity and worth of the scholar; of the abstract relation of the scholar to the State. . . . But would you have counted him a friend of Greece who quietly discussed the abstract nature of patriotism on that Greek summer day through whose hopeless and immortal hours Leonidas and his three hundred stood at Thermopylæ for liberty?" The application was obvious, but it was not left to be inferred. It was insisted on with all the frankness, emphasis, and

eloquence that the young speaker could command. Kansas was the new Thermopylæ. The duty of the American scholar was to fight slavery-extension there and wherever it should rear its horrid front. The same word was spoken to the young men of other colleges. We have all met some of those young men, now getting old, and their faces have glowed, and their eyes have flashed or dimmed, as they have told us how their hearts leaped up to meet the young orator's challenge of their manhood with a glad reply. It was a profoundly significant circumstance that then, and for the next four years, Curtis was a young man speaking to young men. The young manhood of the country elected him its representative in the great debate, idealized itself in the bright vision of his radiant personality and glowing speech, and pledged itself



to go upon whatever quest this Galahad assigned. The careful student of those times assures us that it was the vote of the young men who came to their first ballot from 1856 to 1860 that made the defeat of Frémont in the former, a victory for Lincoln in the latter, year. But they did more than this: they made the victory for Lincoln a victory for emancipation as the war went on; albeit the Republican party had so far assimilated the Compromises of 1850, and Daniel Webster's seventh-of-March speech, that neither in its platform of 1856 nor in its platform of 1860 had it demanded the repeal of the Fugitive-Slave Law or the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. It was the Abolitionist-Republicans that put the war-power of the government into Lincoln's hands and bade him use it for the emancipation of the slave. And

Curtis was an Abolitionist-Republican, a Republican with a truly moral, not merely a political, hatred of slavery, and his influence with the young men of America was compact not merely with hatred of slavery-extension, but with hatred of slavery itself, and the conviction that slavery in America must perish before Freedom could begin to live her proper life. It was an influence distinctly calculated to abate the influence of the cohorts of place-hunters, whom the doubtfulness of victory had kept at bay in 1856, but whom the prospect of victory in 1860 brought down like a wolf on the fold. Here, in this three-fold service—his marshalling of the young men the way that they should go, his abolitionizing of the Republican party, his distrust of those who came into the party as it swept to victory because they understood that to



the victors in politics belonged the spoils of office—here was a service which would make the name of Curtis forever eminent and honorable if he had done no other to the party that he loved so much, to the country that he loved so much more than party, to the wide humanity and the eternal justice that he loved the most of all.

Yet this was but a little part of his great work; and from 1863, when he became editor of *Harper's Weekly*, his opportunity for influencing his countrymen was immeasurably enhanced. Here was a chair, less easy than the other, from which he could speak every week to some two or three hundred thousand of his countrymen, if not twice or thrice as many. So great a privilege was never more enjoyed or exercised with a better conscience for the work in hand. If his leaders do

not contain a history of our politics during thirty interesting and eventful years, they contain a commentary and a criticism on that history of great value, and in their day they were an effective contribution to public opinion and did much to shape it to the most honorable and useful ends. The editor's predilection was for the larger aspects of events, and from his calm discussion one would hardly guess, at this remove, what storms were sometimes beating on the four corners of the house, and how the fountains of the great political deep were broken up. It is easy to be wise long after the event; not easy to be always wise right in the heart of it. Could Curtis have foreseen all that he saw at length, he would have written differently of many persons and of many things. But in the main it is remarkable how frequently his judg-



ment has been ratified by the subsequent consensus of the competent. To the impeachment of President Johnson he brought a hesitating sympathy; but, when the impeachment failed, there was no hesitation in the stern rebuke which he administered to those who were for drumming Fessenden and Grimes and Trumbull out of the party because they had refused to vote according to the partisan dictation. In the agonies of reconstruction he foresaw the dangers that would ensue on the enfranchisement of the emancipated slaves; but he was a politician after the manner of Burke, insisting that one must always do the best thing possible, though it may not be the best imaginable. He brought the same common-sense to the disputed election of 1876, advocating in advance, and afterwards sustaining loyally, the heroic

remedy that allayed the raging fever of the time. He thought highly of the advice which Sir Philip Sidney gave his brother, "Whenever you hear of a good war, go to it," and in his editorial work he never failed to act upon this hint. At one time it was a war for municipal purification ; at another for the rights of women to whatever of industrial, educational, and political enlargement they require for a more complete and noble womanhood ; at another against those who made the capitol at Washington for some years a den of thieves ; and first, last, and always the war he went to was a war for independence in politics and for the conduct of the civil government on business principles—"The tools to those who can handle them, as long as they handle them well."

When Curtis spoke of Lowell in this

place a year ago, his admiration for his friend, ascending from one summit to another, hailed him at last the representative Independent in our politics. Straightway we saw the wreath which he had woven for another circle his own head. With happy and serene unconsciousness, in describing Lowell's independency he had described his own; and when we gave him our applause, it was even more for Lowell's eulogist than for Lowell that we made it loud and long. No other Independent was so conspicuous or so influential in 1884. He was the president-maker of that strange and fateful year, but his independency was not the incident of a particular campaign; it was the persistent habit of his whole political career. It was as an Independent, in the convention which nominated Abraham Lincoln, that he alone of all

the delegation from his State refused to bind himself to vote for Mr. Seward to the bitter end. It was as an Independent that he smashed the party programme in the same convention, when it had driven out Joshua R. Giddings and refused to incorporate a phrase from the Declaration of Independence in the party platform. Then it was that, with one of the shortest speeches that he ever made, he reversed the action of the convention and brought back its "grand old man" to enjoy the triumph won. It was as an Independent that he stood in 1868 for the right of Fessenden and his companions to vote as they thought best on the impeachment, whatever the most secret counsels of the party had decreed. It was as an Independent that he advised men to refuse their votes to one candidate for the governorship of New



York and to vote against another, suiting his actions to his words. And when in 1884 the Republican party proceeded to make what seemed to him "a nomination not fit to be made," there was nothing, even in the most particular circumstances of the event, that had been unprepared for in his experience up to that sorrowful and boding time. In 1873, when General Butler was raiding Massachusetts in the hope of capturing a nomination for the place which John Hancock and Samuel Adams had once filled, Curtis had written: "A caucus or a convention is merely a conference of delegates of the party to determine how the organization may, at the particular time and under the existing circumstances, best procure its end. . . . It is the duty of each delegate to spare no effort to influence wisely the action of

the party. He cannot rightfully surrender his opportunity to prevent an enormous and fatal party blunder. . . . But no delegate has lost the privilege of doing right because he has tried to persuade others not to do wrong." These principles lost nothing of their cogency as time went on, and when the time arrived for him to act on them in 1884 he did so without a moment's hesitation, though not without many did he consent to take that position of leadership in the revolt to which he was inevitably assigned. But because no man had ever loved the Republican party more than he, or served it more unselfishly, it was as if his heart were cleft asunder by the blow which severed him from its counsels and marshalled him in the opposing ranks. The conscientiousness of his behavior must be measured by his devotion to





the Republican tradition of nationality as opposed to the Democratic insistence upon local rights—a devotion which made him an independent Republican until his dying day; by his passionate response to the associations of a glorious party history, in which his had been a great and honorable share; and by the great refusals that he made; for he was not without ambition, and, could he have accepted the conclusions which were honestly maintained by many of his wisest and most trusted friends, honors but little meaner than the highest would have been easily within his grasp. But he had long fed his heart on the great words of Martin Luther, “For it is neither safe nor right to do anything against conscience”; and in the crucial hour he faced the sovereignty of America, as Luther had faced the sovereignty of

the Empire, and said very simply, "Here I stand; I can do no otherwise. God help me! Amen!"

"Whenever you hear of a good war go to it." He heard of many, and he went to each in turn with a strong, patient heart, doing his best to bring the good things uppermost and to beat the others down. But his biggest war—which did not make his ambition virtue, because it found it so—was against the doctrine that to the political victors belong the spoils of office, and upon the practice which illustrated and enforced this doctrine in every State and city, as well as in the general government, of the United States. Even his political independence was an incident of this larger business, a means directed to the end of honest and effective administration, which we can never have so long as it is understood that the



party candidate must be supported, whatever his moral character, once the nomination has been made. Many, before Curtis found his place as the acknowledged head and front of the Civil Service Reform movement, had appreciated the dangers of the situation, and had done yeomen's service in the first steps towards reformation, which always cost so much when giant evils are assailed. Those who insist that the spoils system is inseparable from party government are strangely ignorant that there was no such system during the presidency of Washington and his successors for a period of forty years, and that it first arose from no political necessity, but in General Jackson's personal animosity to John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay. Once having taken root, it grew as only do the deadliest morbid growths. It

should go hard but they would better their instructions, the Whigs said to the Democrats, when they had drowned Clay and Webster in hard cider, and floated themselves into office on that amber tide. With each successive party change there was a cleaner sweep. There were some mild rebukes, some passionate execrations; but they were iridescent bubbles, quickly breaking in the thick and poisoned air. Moreover, the time had the defect of its quality. The antislavery enterprise was too engrossing for any other to find lodgement in the public mind. Yet the ethical laws were not so silent in the midst of arms that Abraham Lincoln could not hear their solemn voices when he said, pointing to a crowd of office-seekers that besieged his door, "Here you have something that may become more dangerous to the Republic than the rebellion itself."



But it was in the years immediately following the war that the evils of the spoils system came home to the more thoughtful with novel and appalling force. Its old evils were as gross as ever: the disturbance and impoverishment of the public service; the horrible injustice to a great body of faithful public servants; the creation of a class of political loafers hanging on the skirts of senators and representatives, and waiting, like the impecunious Micawber, for something to turn up. But all of these evils were innocuous compared with the drain upon the energies of public men, who needed all their stock for the new problems that were coming up, and the corruption of those energies by base misuse. Hence the decay of legislative faculty, the shrinking of the statesman and the bloating of the obsequious henchman into the





party boss—that great American fungus which thrives best where there is most rottenness and makes it more.

Here was a new slavery needing a new Garrison to demand immediate and unconditional abolition, while still disposed to make the most of every possible abridgment of the monstrous wrong. George William Curtis was the man who met the requisition. But as Garrison had his Benjamin Lundy, so Curtis had his Thomas Allen Jenckes. Thirty years before he had listened with admiration to a commencement poem by a young man of that name, and was particularly pleased with one line of it, which described the dude of that Jacksonian time, a character as yet unnamed, as “vain folly’s last edition, bound in calf.” Little the boy who joined in the uproarious applause that followed this description imagined





that the youth whom he applauded would be his brave forerunner in the abatement of the most insidious evil that has ever preyed upon the vitals of our national life.

It was in 1865 that Mr. Jenckes introduced his first bill for the reform of the civil service into the House of Representatives. It was not till 1871 that the lineal descendant of this bill went into operation. In the meantime Mr. Jenckes, a lawyer, a scholar, a statesman, whose ample modesty could not conceal the breadth and lofty stature of his mind, did more than any one, if not than all others, to keep the work alive. His elaborate reports are still an arsenal from which all needful weapons can be drawn to fight the battle of reform. Curtis, whose advocacy of the movement had been from the beginning to the end of the initial stage, was made

President of the Commission which General Grant appointed to carry out the new regulations. For two years he gave himself with restless ardor to the work of the Commission, conscious of the increasing enmity of the President's party and of his declining interest, so plastic was the President's mind to Mr. Conkling's eager stress, while Mr. Conkling was the arch-enemy of the reform. When Curtis told the President that he would be overpowered by adverse pressure, "he smiled incredulously, but he presently abandoned reform." Curtis's disappointment was immense; his chagrin was hardly less; but it was not long before he rallied his sick heart, and went to work as never in his life before to force the matter on the public conscience and through that on the jealous partisans of either House, who relished not a change whereby their



darling occupation would be gone. Civil Service associations and the National League were formed, and Mr. Curtis, as the President of the League and of the New York Association, for a dozen years exercised a powerful influence on the progress of events. The opposition was as bitter and as rancorous as he anticipated, but he was never more himself than when encountering a proud and arrogant majority; and to read his leaders is to feel how his blood warmed with the encounter, while still his head remained as cool as ever and his hand as firm.

Teaching in parables in one of his addresses at the Annual Meeting of the League, he told the story of the Northern soldier who, asking a companion about some hellish noise, was answered, "That is the rebel yell. Does it frighten you?" "Frighten me!"

said the questioner—"it is the music to which I march." Not otherwise for him was the enraged and savage yell of those who were resolved that they must have the offices to keep their loyal henchmen and their vicious heelers in good heart. Andrews Norton said that reading Joseph Buckminster's orations was like walking in the triumphal procession of truth. To read the twelve addresses which Curtis made as President of the League is like marching in the triumphal procession of reform. The procession had its delays and halts, as all such processions do, but from Hayes, too conscientious to be loved by baser men, to Garfield, a sacrifice on the polluted shrine of the Spoils System, and from Arthur, solemnized by his tragical initiation, to Cleveland, striving against fearful odds, there was a great advance. The last weeks of Pres-



ident Harrison's administration have seen a tardy extension of the Classified Service, corresponding to a similar late repentance of his predecessor, and now that service numbers forty-four thousand offices—nearly, or quite, one fourth of all the civil offices in the United States. No friend of the reform imagines that the Commission is a perfect instrument, no one pretends that it excludes all partisan influence. The germs of cholera and typhus are more easily destroyed. But the gain has been immense, and it is prophecy and pledge of better things to come. The reform attracted many generous and noble spirits; but for high enthusiasm and exalted purpose and unconquerable hope Curtis was ever easily the first, the leader and inspirer of the sometimes wavering, often weary and impatient, line. We love to think of

Wren's "*Si monumentum*" in the great London church he built to God. Curtis will have various monuments—here a memorial academy and there a statue of imperishable bronze; but there will be a better one than these. "Would you see his monument, look around you." When every civil office in our various States and cities and in the national government has been redeemed from the old wickedness and folly, to see the monument of Curtis we shall only have to look around us on a political system answering to his hope, of which every true American may be justly proud.

The life of Curtis was so full of various activities that only the most salient can be named in such an address as this. But it must not go unsaid that, as Regent and Chancellor of the University of the State of New York,



he so interpreted and discharged the duties of each office in its turn that the high-sounding titles were not too venerable and august to suit the port and carriage of the man; though the regret of Charles Lamb was his also, that he had never fed upon "the sweet food of academic institution." In his Chancellor's address of 1890 he said, "Amid the exaltation and coronation of material success let this University here annually announce in words and deeds the dignity and superiority of the intellectual and spiritual life, and strengthen itself to resist the insidious invasion of that life by the superb and seductive spirit of material prosperity." In those words you have the spiritual essence of his life. It was his calm yet passionate preference for things beautiful and true and good to things loud and showy and unreal; his con-

fidence that no material prosperity was worth having without devotion to ideal ends, even if without such devotion it could long endure.

The multitude of his lectures and addresses upon educational and social topics does not more approve the bounty of his mind than it does the goodness of his heart. But this had many illustrations. It was like him to read every word of Pierce's "Sumner" in manuscript with critical attention. He found it none too long for his un-failing interest in the depiction of a splendid fame. He was always doing things that had no such reward, nor any but the pleasure which they gave. His talk was history and biography and poetry and politics, a wealth of anecdote, a stream of golden reminiscences of men and things; and, could he have had a Boswell to take it down,





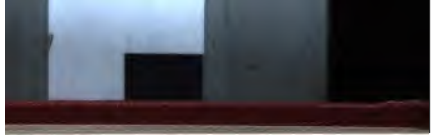
when he came to print it the capital  
“ I ” would not have given out, as with  
the Oxford scholar, for his talk was  
little of himself. Ever loyal to the de-  
parted days, the new poets and musi-  
cians could not wean him from the old.  
“ Lohengrin ”? Yes, but then “ Lucia ”  
too; and Longfellow and Tennyson in  
hearty preference to those

“ howling dervishes of song  
Who craze the brain with their delirious dance.”

Freely he had received; as freely he  
dispensed; and yet the best of all he  
had to give was neither this nor that:  
it was himself, his personality, so quiet  
yet so strong, interpenetrating alike his  
greatest duties and his humblest tasks,  
and his most leisured hours as well,  
with something very noble, sweet, and  
good, and drawing us to him by such  
cords of reverence and affection that

we would not break them if we could, and could not if we would.

Reverently and gratefully blending the name of Lowell with that of Washington in his address a year ago, he called them "men whose lives are a glorious service and whose memories are a benediction." "Such Americans are," he said, "like mountain summits that announce the day, harbingers of the future which shall justify our faith and fulfil the promise of America to mankind." Of these mountain summits there are as many in our history as there are in Switzerland of those which from the Rigi's top one sees in a continuous line for many a shining league—the Jungfrau and the Wetterhorn and the Silberhorn and a hundred others, each one a Monte Rosa in the early dawn. But it is not always the highest of the range whose appeal is



strongest to our hearts ; and if, among the mountain summits of our history, there are those that lift themselves with more solitary grandeur into a colder air, there is not one that shines with a more lovely light than that of the scholar, the writer, the humorist, the orator, the patriot, the reformer, the man “whose every word and thought was a good deed”—whom you shall name in silence in your grateful hearts.

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